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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to examine the transition of newcomer teachers from Pacific Rim countries as they entered selected California school settings. Twelve teachers from China, Hong Kong, Korea, Mexico, and Vietnam were the research participants, and all had had prior teaching experience in their native countries. As the researcher and the participants examined teaching histories, traditions, and strategies for action, three primary categories for analysis emerged: liminality, (those moments of cultural transition when the individual is between established patterns of thought and behavior), communitas (unstructured communion of equal individuals), and the fusion of horizons (self-awareness), categories prominent in hermeneutical theory. A survey instrument and an interview protocol were designed to provide data about participants' experiences as they negotiated their transitions into new professional environments. Newcomer teachers reported experiences in three general domains: (1) the culture at large; (2) the new school environment; and (3) the classroom. Similar experiences were often reported, so certain themes such as classroom management, the role of the teacher, and class size recurred throughout. Implications of the study include: sufficient time must be allowed for the newcomer to become acquainted with the new situation; atttention must be paid to the ways the culture of schools is transmitted and to the cultural messages being transmitted; and ways of providing peer relationships and problem-solving opportunities through dialogic interaction need to be developed. Areas for future research are also discussed. (LL)

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CROSS-CULTURAL WORK ENVIRONMENTS: Fusions of Histories and Traditions Among Newcomer Teachers to California

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CROSS-CULTURAL WORK ENVIRONMENTS: Fusions of Histories and Traditions Among Newcomer Teachers to California

California schools are experiencing an increase in foreign-born teachers. The purpose of this study was to examine the transition of newcomer teachers from Pacific Rim countries as they entered selected California school settings. Ways to recognize successful prior teaching experience while providing opportunities to appropriate new professional norms were also explored.

Twelve teachers from Pacific Rim countries were the research participants. Countries represented were China, Hong Kong, Korea, Mexico and Vietnam. Referrals for potential participants were requested from school district and university personnel. Some teachers became participants by nomination of personal acquaintances of the researcher or other participants. All of the participants had prior teaching experience in elementary or college level educational institutions in their native countries.

Methodology: A survey instrument and an interview protocol were designed to provide data about the participants' experiences as they negotiated their transitions into new professional environments. The researcher met with each of the participants individually. The conversations were tape recorded, transcribed

by the researcher, then returned to the participants for any changes the participants wished to make. Data were analyzed using a critical hermeneutics framework and the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

The research participants and I examined our teaching histories, our traditions, and our strategies for action. Three primary categories for analysis emerged: liminality, communitas and fusion of horizons.

Liminality is a notion that has particular cogency for the newly arrived teacher because it is during the transition period that liminal space is the most apparent. The Dutch anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep (1960), uses the concept of liminality to designate those moments in cultural transition where the individual is "betwixt and between" established patterns of thought and behavior. C. A. Bowers (1987: 6) also uses this definition, and adds:

> As taken-for-granted beliefs are made explicit and are challenged, there is a moment in social and conceptual time when the individual experiences the temporary openness of liminal space...In being "betwixt and between" accepted definitions that will serve as the basis of social experience, new definitions can be presented, and the conceptual foundations of authority renegotiated...As tradition is disrupted, the political role of communication changes; the liminality of the social situation provides the potential for a transition to new ways of thinking and acting.

It is at this moment, before a commitment is made to new possibilities, that newcomers experience liminal space. Attempting to foster shared understandings of this sensation of being betwixt and between, research participants were asked:

1) What is socialization and enculturation?

2) What is socialization and enculturation in your native country? In your new school district?

3) What choices or decisions have you had to make? What concerns have you had?

The second research category, communitas, has been described by Victor Turner (1987) as society seen or experienced as "an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals. He argues that there is an affinity between liminality and communitas, that within the liminal space communitas is most evident. This research paradigm provides the method for examining through discourse whether or not there is a link between communitas and liminality in the world of the newly-arrived teacher. Research participants were asked to consider these questions:

1) What would you offer new teachers? How would you make use of their past histories?

2) Would it be different for new teachers coming from countries outside the United States?

3) How does this contribute to your collaborative vision for the future?

The final category for research was fusion of horizons. It is the struggle to understand and to do justice to something that at once strikes us as strange and alien yet has sufficient affinity with us that we can come to understand it (Bernstein 1988: 141). In this study I examined the possibility of the fusion of the horizon of the newcomer teacher with the horizons

of those teachers already familiar with the norms of the established workplace.

The concept of fusion of horizons has to do with the change of self. Gadamer (1988: 269) explains that:

> The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons etc.

Self-awareness, including the prejudices that form our horizon is the understanding that we must seek. Gadamer (1988: 269) cautions us:

> A person who has no horizon is a man who does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him. Contrariwise, to have an horizon means not to be limited to what is nearest, but to be able to see beyond it. A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, as near or far, great or small.

Gadamer (1988: 247) distinguishes between blind prejudices and "justified prejudices productive of knowledge," or what Bernstein (1988: 128) calls "enabling prejudices." Gadamer's thesis is that both types of prejudices are constitutive of what we are. The problem, then, is a matter of differentiating which of our prejudices are blind and which are enabling. Gadamer (1988: 86) tells us it is through encounters with works of art, with texts, with whatever is handed down to us through tradition, that we come to differentiate among our prejudices. He tells us we achieve self-knowledge through dialogic encounter with what is alien to us yet makes a claim upon us and has an affinity with

what we are.

Taylor (1988: 310) puts it this way:

> By contrast, the modern ideal of disengagement requires a reflexive stance. We have to turn inward and become aware of our own activity and of the processes that form us. We have to take charge of constructing our own representation of the world, which otherwise goes on without order and consequently without science; we have to take charge of the processes by which associations form and shape our character and outlook. Disengagement demands that we stop simply living in the body or within our traditions or habits, and by making them objects for us, subject them to radical scrutiny and remaking.

Participants were asked four questions regarding the fusions of horizons:

1) What teaching practices from your country would you like to see incorporated into California schools?

2) What teaching practices from California would you like to see incorporated into schools in your country?

3) What prior expectations did you have about teaching and schools in California? How well were they met?

4) What surprises did you find in California schools?

Summary: Newcomer teachers reported experiences pertaining to liminality, communitas and fusions of horizons in three general domains:

- the culture at large
- the new school environment
- within their classrooms.

Similar experiences were often reported, so certain themes such as classroom management, the role of the teacher, and class size, recurred throughout the narrative.

Implications: The culture at large, the new school environment, and the individual classroom need to be considered when looking at the transition of newcomer teachers into California schools.

. Allowing sufficient time for the newcomer to become acquainted with the new situation is very important.

. Attention needs to be paid to the ways the culture of schools is transmitted, and to the cultural messages being transmitted.

. Ways of providing peer relationships and problem-solving opportunities through dialogic interaction need to be developed.

Areas for Future Research:

. Examining rites and ceremonies that could potentially provide the communitas within which professional and personal relationships are formed.

. Analyzing to determine whether or not newcomer teachers from foreign countries have the same access to information as other new teachers.

. Determining why newcomers like workshops when most old-timers would rather not attend.

. Investigating need to create conditions and provide resources that sustain continuous development of students and educators.

. Investigating fruitfulness of reflexive conversation in shaping professional praxis for newcomer teacher.

Research Praxis:

As I reflect on my initial reasons for undertaking this research project, I have a revised set of reasons for studying the experiences of newcomer teachers as they make the transition to California school environments. These reasons can be stated in the following way: the project taught me more than any single course I've taken, though the courses were important preliminary and supporting steps; I learned new and unexpected directions, rather than merely verifying ideas gleaned from readings; I'm confident that it improved my way of being in the world in a permanent way. As a school administrator I continue to explore new ways to use conversation in developing understandings among staff members, working to make tacit understandings explicit, so that together we can shape our professional praxis to better serve our students and ourselves.

Participation in this project has demonstrated to me the merits of using hermeneutic field-based research in the study of socialization and enculturation. These values can be stated in the following way: they challenge our assumptions about reality; they direct our attention to normative conditions of life in California classrooms; they look at knowledge as a social act which cannot be divorced from its social context; they explore contradictions within classroom life; they help us understand the underlying meanings people in educational environments ascribe to their activities and to understand the significance these

meanings have for people. Employing these new meanings, we can seek ways, through conversation, to develop work environments that support cultural pluralism and lead to meaningful cross-cultural understandings.

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